



Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, February 17, 2022

Testimony submitted by Alison Weir, Policy Advocate/Staff Attorney, Greater Hartford Legal Aid

**H.B. 5033, An Act Addressing the Needs of Food-Insecure Students in Public Institutions of Higher Education**

My name is Alison Weir, and I am an attorney and policy advocate with Greater Hartford Legal Aid (GHLA). On behalf of GHLA, Connecticut Legal Services, and New Haven Legal Assistance Association I am writing in support of HB 5033.

Traditionally, anti-hunger policies have not looked at college students in general. They were premised on the assumption that students in higher education were middle class students who might "take advantage" of any anti-hunger programs while attending college, despite access to family resources. That assumption, if ever valid, is no longer true. Fewer than 30% of college students fit the traditional model of going straight to college from high school as a dependent of their parents, as the U.S. Government Accountability Office has noted.<sup>1</sup> There is an epidemic of hunger on college campuses presently.

This bill recognizes the flaw in that assumption, and takes aim at the growing epidemic of hunger on campus. Going to college is a stressful activity at the best of times, and is that much more stressful when you are hungry and unsure of where your next meal will come from. Hunger and stress impede learning and short-change the student of their academic potential. The bill directs the state's public higher education system to identify and address food-insecurity on each public campus to ensure that all students have the nutrition assistance necessary to operate at their highest potential.

Beyond simply identifying food-insecure students, the bill also makes possible an increase in federal funding to address student hunger. The bill makes the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program more accessible to students. Although the rules generally limit SNAP for college students, the Food Stamp Act allows states to exempt students from these restrictions, if they are enrolled in programs that expand their employability, in accordance with certain federal criteria. A number of other states including Washington, Massachusetts, California and Illinois have expanded SNAP eligibility for students in this way. This not only benefits the students, it brings more SNAP dollars into the state economy. It is time for our state to join these other states in identifying the programs in the state college system that meet the federal criteria for employability and make the SNAP program more accessible to the students who are eligible.

Under the Food Stamp Act, states can determine which programs qualify, by reference to the specified federal criteria. No federal approval is necessary. Students qualifying under such a program are eligible from enrollment in the program through classes and vacation periods until graduation. This is a critical distinction from SNAP eligibility for those enrolled in SNAP E & T programs, for whom eligibility ends when the specific program ends.

As we discovered during the pandemic, the SNAP program is highly effective at reducing food insecurity and brings additional federal dollars into the state economy. College is a stressful time in the best of circumstances; trying to study while hungry or worrying where your next meal is coming from adds the stress and undercuts the potential of our students. This bill will make SNAP more accessible to our students.

I urge you to support this bill and take aim at student hunger on our college campuses. Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> *FOOD INSECURITY: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits Report to Congressional Requesters*, December 2018, GAO-19-95, United States Government Accountability Office, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/696254.pdf>.